Belgium's absent national identity comes at a price

By Marc Hooghe

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Belgium is going through an existential crisis. The question on everyone's mind is: Do we really live in a failed state? Objectively, the answer is no. But the current anxiety points to a severe loss of confidence that is just as dangerous.

Two months after terrorist attacks that killed 32 people, the country is in a state of shock. People wonder what could have been done to prevent the violence. They worry that the authorities will not be able to protect them against further attacks. Why did it happen here? is a common refrain. And will it happen again?

It is inevitable that a country struck by terrorism will slide into this kind of soul searching. Whether you live in Madrid, London, Paris or Brussels, you now think twice before you get on public transport after a major attack, and you feel, for a time, less safe. But there is one major difference here.

In Spain, the U.K. and France, citizens rallied around a common identity to cope with the aftermath of the violence. In the long run, these traumatic events did not fundamentally alter public opinion. What all these countries have in common, though, is a strong sense of national identity and pride.

Belgians do not have this comfort. More than two months after the attacks, there has been no collective grieving and no sense of collective responsibility.

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Developments since the bombings have only added insult to injury: The airport's air traffic controllers went on strike, the airport police insisted on cumbersome procedures, extremists marched on the Place de la Bourse where vigils had been held, and politicians blamed one another for failing to prevent carnage. No one rallied behind the Belgian flag. No one watched King Philippe's televised speech the day of the attacks. The royal family's statements of sympathy have fallen on deaf ears and failed to catch the media's attention. A remembrance march in April attracted only a few thousand people.

So is Belgium a failed state? The question, first raised by POLITICO, has captivated the collective imagination. Quite a few Belgians would agree with the diagnosis.

As a political scientist, I have to disagree. A failed state implies a total breakdown of the state institutions and the collapse of law and order. This is not the case here. Income, unemployment and economic growth figures are all close to the European average. Life expectancy is high and continues to rise. Crime rates are low. The quality of education and health care is well above the European average. In comparison to its European neighbors, Belgium is by no means an outlier.

I would like to put forward a more interesting question: Why are Belgians so willing to believe they live in a failed state?

Concerns about the effectiveness of the Belgian state are not new. Over the past decades, the role of the state was cut back considerably and the bulk of responsibilities now rests with the regions. The notion of a strong central authority has all but evaporated.

National pride is absent in Belgium. In fact, this may be the only thing we are truly proud of. Belgium is not an aggressive state, and we are good at making compromises.

The absence of collective identity does come at a price, however. What do we care if outsiders have a negative perception of Brussels, or Belgium as whole? For the most part, we share their negative outlook.

Why rally behind the flag when we don't believe in it ourselves?

Belgium has been portrayed as a weak country, and nationalist sentiments in Flanders and Wallonia remain strong. Analysis of what went wrong on March 22 has been strongly influenced by these identity-based positions.

Flemish parties place the blame on Brussels' predominantly French-speaking police force. French-speaking parties point the finger at Flemish politicians, accusing them of favoring tougher immigration laws and dividing society.

Other countries react to acts of violence with collective mourning. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Belgium is going through an episode of collective depression.

There is no easy way out. The Flemish-speaking population does not expect much to change on the federal level. National loyalty has typically been stronger among French-speaking Belgians, but since Flemish politicians began to dominate the federal government the feeling has changed dramatically. Walloons now perceive the government as a form of Flemish authority.

For decades, Belgian political elites have claimed the country has no real future, and that nationalist forces will eventually prevail. For non-Belgian observers, it is often striking that there is so little resistance to this defeatist discourse.

Belgians have indeed demonstrated it is perfectly possible to operate without a strong sense of national identity — or even a government. But increasingly, this seems to have been a fair-weather phenomenon. In hard times, a defined sense of national identity is an asset — a lesson the Belgians are now learning the hard way.

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